

**A CASE STUDY TO UNDERSTAND THE SENTIMENTS OF THE
MONPAS WITH THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY IN TAWANG
DISTRICT**

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ABSTRACT

Arunachal Pradesh is a home to 26 major tribe and more than 100 sub tribes. Each tribe has its own beliefs, customs, dialect, attire, faith and religion. These give people a sense of who they are and from where they belong. Basically, these give an identity to an individual. Today, in Arunachal Pradesh majority of the people are renouncing their indigenous faith and started embracing Christianity as their religion. Modernity in the form of Christianity has brought in a new form of culture and people are losing it own identity. However, Christianity has not been able to make significant inroads to the Monpa tribe, where people are predominantly Buddhist. Recently, a construction of a church in the region of Tawang has sparked controversies between Christians and Buddhists community. In this context, the present study tried to analyse the growing controversies between these two communities. The study also tried to understand the rise of Christianity and people's perspective towards Christianity in Tawang region. The study is based on both primary and secondary data. During the course of study, it is found that Buddhism in the Tawang has a deep root as it was institutionalized more than 300 years ago. Majority of Monpas are very conservative and devoted to Buddhism. They see Christians as aggressive proselytizer, whose only intension is to convert one's belief. Monpas were afraid of losing their identity if Christians were allowed to construct church in the district. On the other hand, the Christians believe that there should be space for both the religions and Monpas have no right to take hold of the basic fundamental right. The issue is still underway; there is a need of mutual understanding between these two communities by considering the religious sentiments, and to maintain peace, tranquility and communal harmony in the state.

KEYWORDS: *Monpa, Indigenous, Religion, Christianity, Impact, Change, Belief.*

INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist population of the Arunachal Pradesh which resides in the Tawang and West Kameng district is known as Monpa. The term Monpa is a word coined by Tibetans, referring to the people of Monyul (*land of Monpa*) who lived in the lowlands bordering the southern part of Tibet. They had a long standing relationship with the Tibetans, in terms of trade, culture and religion. The Monpas are the followers of Mahayana Buddhism. Buddhism has contributed immensely to the art and culture of Arunachal Pradesh in general and Tawang district in particular. Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh is a living religion having monks, monasteries, stupas, rituals, dances, festivals, arts and crafts, which provide an idea of Buddhist cultural heritage of the state. In Tawang district one can find various sub-sects

of Tibetan Buddhism i.e., Nyingpa, Kagyu and Gelugpa. It is said that the message of Buddhism was brought to them by guru Padmasambhava popularly known as Lopon Rimboche and Lopon Pema Jungney, who came from Tibet, in 8th century AD. The Tawang district has a population of around 50 thousand, out of which 69.87 percent follows Buddhism, Census of India, 2011.

Recently, a construction of a church in the region of Tawang has sparked controversies between Christians and Monpas in Arunachal Pradesh. According to the studies, there has been inclination towards Christianity in the state but it has not been pervasive in the region of Tawang, where people are staunch practitioners of Buddhism. However, in the past few years, a few Monpa individuals, mostly young people, have started embracing Christianity but they immediately faced strong pressure from their families and communities to renounce their new faith. Some did, but others counted the cost and continue to follow Christ as Lord. Majority of Monpas are very conservative and devoted to Buddhism. They see Christians as aggressive proselytizer, whose only intension is to convert one's belief. Monpas were afraid of losing their identity if Christians were allowed to construct church in the district. They believe that the Church building towering over every other structure is a powerful symbol and acts like a magnet to local communities, which the proselytisers will find easy to lure the gullible folks with all sorts of enticements. On the other hand, the Christians believe that there should be space for both the religions and Monpas have no right to take hold of the basic fundamental right. Since, the Buddhists and Christians are right in their own perspective, there is a need for mutual understanding, so that the peace and harmony of the state could be maintained. Therefore, in this context, the present study tried to understand the sentiments of Monpas with the rise of Christianity and also to know people's perspective towards Christianity in Tawang district.

Objectives

1. To understand the rise of Buddhism in Tawang district.
2. To analyze the growing controversies between Christians and Monpas in Arunachal Pradesh.
3. To understand people's perspective towards Christianity in the Tawang region.

Study Area and Methods

The study was conducted in Namazing and Kharsa Villages of Jang sub-division and Tawang district headquarter. The Jang sub-division is situated 37 km away from the Tawang district headquarters. The district occupies an area of 2172 Sq.km with population density of 23 per sq.km and is situated at the height of 3500 meters from sea level. The district is roughly located around latitude 70⁰45' N and longitude 90⁰ 15' E at the northwest extremity of bordering China. According to the 2011 census, Tawang district has 10062 households with the population of 49977 out of which 29151 are males and 20826 are females with a sex ratio of 701 females for every 1000 males. Tawang district have lower literacy rate compared to overall Arunachal Pradesh. The literacy rate of Tawang is 52.17 percent compared to 65.38 percent in Arunachal Pradesh (Population Census, 2011).

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. The secondary data were collected from media sources, articles and population census, 2011. The primary data were collected by conducting field survey in Tawang district. The random sampling technique was applied to select the individuals for the collection of required data as this technique reduces biasness and ensures a representative sample. The data were collected through the personal interview method and Google form was also circulated among the educated youths of Tawang. Adequate time was given to the respondent during the interview. The duration of each

interview was around 15 minutes. The questionnaire was so designed to know the historical background of Buddhism and to analyse people's perspective towards Christianity in the region. The sample size was 60 individuals. The collected data were tabulated and processed and analyzed in terms of percentage.

Rise of Buddhism in Tawang District

Before the advent of Buddhism, the Monpas believed in the existence of numerous gods and demons all around them. These were held to personify the powers and forces of their wild highland landscape and were believed to be responsible for all the calamities threatening their welfare. So they participated these supernatural beings by performing rites in which the sacrifice of animals formed an important part (*Sarkar. N, 1980*). However, when Monpa community took to Buddhism, it stopped these rites but accepted these indigenous supernatural beings in its pantheon as the local defenders of its faith and in return for such services they became entitled to be worshipped according to the manner of the Buddhist rituals.

Gyaltse Tulku (the former Abbot of the Tawang Monastery) in his article the '*origin of Buddhism and the historical account of Mon Tawang Monastery*', throws light on the advent of Buddhism to Monyul (*Land of Monpas*). According to him, there lived a great Tibetan religious King Songtsang Gampo. He was the first to bring the light of the Buddhist teachings to Monyul in the 7th Century A.D.

However, the traditions of the Monpas and Sherdukpens claim that the message of Buddhism was brought to them in the 8th century by guru Padmasambhava who is also known as Lupon Rimboche and Lupon Pema Jungney. It is said that Padmasambhav had extensively travelled in the area and there are seven such places in Monpa area hallowed by the visit of Padmasambhav. These are Taktsang, Jiktsang, Baggajang, Kimnash, Terma Bumgan, Bigha and Gomefuk (*Dutta. S. & Tripathy B, 2008*).

Tradition has it that it was Padmasambhav who predicted the construction of the three oldest Buddhist temples at Tawang. It is said that Sherbhum a Nyingmapa lama from Bhutan and the third son of Pemalingpa came to Tsosum as Tawang in those days and build the three temples of Ugyeling, Sangeling and Tsorgeling. These three temples are collectively known as Lingsum (Three Stones). Nobody knows the period of construction of these temples, but it is said that it was before the establishment of Karmapa temple of Kimnash in the twelfth century. The Ugyeling Gompa is situated about two miles to the south of Tawang township, where as Sangeling and Tsorgeling Gompas are about half a mile to the west of the Ugyeling Gompa.

The history of the Gelugpa in the region starts with Thangston Gyalpo, a lama from Tibet. He was a fallow disciple and associate of the first Dalai Lama, Gendun Drupa. There is a Monpa hamlet called Berkher near Kraling village. Berkher Targe was the householder of this hamlet. With the blessing of Thangston Gyalpo, Brakher Targey had seven intelligent and valiant sons born to him. His household became very popular and later it is known as Poudun. (Pou-Intellegent and valiant; dun- seven). His second son Tanpei Dronme and the seventh son Lopsang Khenchun went Tibet for religious training. The second Dalai Lama asked Tanpei Dronme and his brother, Lopsang Khenchun, to proceed to Lho-mon (Lho-south; Mon- lowland) or the lower country in the south inhibited by the Monpas, build gompa and establish Gelugpa sect there. Accordingly they came to Monpa area and build the Brakhar gompa, Arikadun gompa, Lhangaten gompa, Sang Lamphe gompa and Tedung gompa.

The Gelugpa sect of Buddhism, introduced by Tanpei Dronme in Monpa area, was

sustained, consolidated and extended by series of his incarnations. His fourth incarnation, Lodre Gyatso, on the advice of fifth Dalai Lama, planned to construct a big Gelugpa monastery at the centre of the Monpa area. After the initial active opposition from the Nyingmapa and Karmapa sects, he succeeded eventually to construct the Tawang Monastery sometimes between 1860-61 AD. The site of the Tawang Monastery is believed to have been chosen by a horse of Lodre Gyatso (Ta- Horse; wang- Chosen). The establishment of the Tawang Monastery and the birth of His Holiness the 6th Dalai Lama in Urgelling gave an impetus to the spread of Buddhism in the region. The analysis of historical background of Buddhism in Tawang district depicts that the Buddhism in the region has a deep root, as it was institutionalised more than 300 years ago.

Rise of Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh

Before 1950s, Christian missionary activities were restricted to the foothill areas of the state. Some students from Siang area who attended various missionary schools in Sadiya and Jorhat (in Assam) were among the first from Arunachal Pradesh to have been exposed to Christianity. As a result, by 1950s some of the Adi, the Mishmi and the Nyishi youths were converted into Christianity (*Dabi. T. & Dirchi. M., 2017*). From 1960s the Christian converts seem to have grown in noticeable numbers and it alarmed the then Agency Council equivalent to Legislative Assembly in NEFA days to urge the central government to take suitable steps to protect and promote the indigenous faith of various tribes (*Bath. N, 2006*). To prevent conversion and to protect indigenous faith *The Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1978* was passed by government. Despite of this Act, there has been a drastic change in the religious profile of Arunachal Pradesh. The share of other religion category, which includes indigenous faith (Donyi –Polo) was two-third of the total population in 1971, dropped to 26% in 2011 from as much as 64% in four decades ago. On the other hand, the number of Christian population in the state has increased exponentially during the same period of time. In 1971, the population of Christians was only 3,864 constituting a mere 0.79% of the population. However, Christians emerged as the largest religious community in the state with a share of 30.26% of the total population, according to Census, 2011.

Arunachal Pradesh, unlike other hill States of the northeast had escaped widespread Christianisation until 1981 and, to a large extent, even until 1991. Christian presence in the State began to acquire serious proportions in 2001. The Religion Data of Census 2011 indicates that the State is now well on its way towards nearly complete Christianisation of the Schedule Tribes population as it happened within the first decade or two after Independence in Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur and, to a significant extent, in Meghalaya. The Christian population in the Nyishi inhabiting districts mainly East Kameng, Lower Subansiri and Papum Pare districts, has now become 63 percent of their total population. In 2001, Christians had a share of 41.5 percent in this group. The second most numerous group of the Adi, inhabiting Upper Subansiri and Upper, West and East Siang, is now 28 percent Christian whereas in 1991, only about 12 percent of the Adi were Christian. The smaller communities of the Aka, the Apatani and the Tagin also have acquired considerable Christian presence in the recent past. In the east, the Tangsa of Changlang is now 59 percent Christian, the Wancho of Tirap are more than 95 percent Christian and the Nocte are 67 percent Christian. These communities were largely Hindu or ORPs till recently. Thus Christians have now come to dominate many of the major regions and tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Most of the traditional religious practices including the widely prevalent Donyi Polo are now in danger of being submerged in this flood of Christianity (*Centre for Policy Studies, 2016*).

The sacrifice of animals in the ritual practices is found to be the most common reason for

conversion into Christianity among tribal population. The sacrifice of animals incurs huge expenditure which is unbearable for the poor people. This forced people from avoiding the practice of indigenous belief and later changes their faith to Christianity.

Conflicting views regarding Christianity in Tawang District

Tawang and the adjacent West Kameng district, a majority of the indigenous Monpa people are adherents of various sects of Tibetan Buddhism, while the State has witnessed a sizeable population of indigenous communities converting to Christianity. Arunachal Pradesh was the third state in India (after Odisha and Madhya Pradesh) to pass an anti-conversion act – *The Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1978*. The Act prevents conversion of people of indigenous faiths like Donyi-Poloism, Rangfraism (a tribal variant of Vaishnavism) and Buddhism through force (including physical threats, threats of divine displeasure or social excommunication), inducements or fraud into alien faiths, and imposes heavy penalties on violators. But not a single person has ever been prosecuted under this Act. And even though the Act lays down a stringent procedure involving prior information to be provided to the state administration for any conversions, the procedures are observed only in violation by the Christian church. Similarly, a construction of church in the region of Tawang embroiled a religious tension between Christians and Buddhists of Arunachal Pradesh. The church was first constructed in the year 1999. According to the former pastor D.C. Khunjuju, ‘the land on which the church is constructed was a rejected one, it was a swampy area. When he took charge as a pastor, the condition of church was very poor. So he took an initiative to build a new building’. According to him, the church is constructed to provide a place of worship for Christians, working as government servants, businessmen or even for tourists, it is not constructed to go against Buddhist or to hurt the sentiments of the people.

The foundation stone of the new building church was laid on June 28, 2015 and construction started immediately after that. Some locals raised objections since the land was not legally allotted for the construction. The issue came into light when the district administration issued an order to stop the construction of a church in the district headquarter.

A series of protest was held across the state, lead by Arunachal Christian Forum and the Arunachal Christian Revival Church Council. Allegations were thrown around between the Arunachal Christian Forum, the Arunachal Christian Revival Church Council, and the Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society of Arunachal Pradesh (IFCSAP), who has been spearheading the revival of ancient tribal belief and faith systems. The IFCSAP alleged that the church in question flouted building regulatory norms, while the Christian organisations denied it and claimed that they were being unfairly targeted. The Christian organisations have claimed that the administration in Tawang district was obstructing the construction of a building only because it is a church and not a Buddhist monastery. To resolve the issue, the State government formed a three-member committee of MLAs lead by Minister Mama Natung, MLA Nyato Dokom and MLA Nyamar Karbak to investigate the matter and submit its report. The committee submitted its report to the State Government on 23rd May 2022. In its report, the committee has taken the reference of the Supreme Court and stated that, Court has directed all the states and Union Territories in the country not to allow any unauthorized construction in the name of Temple, Church, Mosque, etc on any public places. The committee recommended that the state government to strictly comply with the court order under *The Unauthorized Religious Structure Policy, 2010*. The committee also suggested that the state government may grant six month to relocate the church at an appropriate location outside the government land. However, the Arunachal Christian Forum immediately rejected the report on the ground that the report itself a void, and the encroachment of

Government land and relocation is not justified. The issue is still underway; there is a need of mutual understanding between these two communities by considering the religious sentiments, and to maintain peace, tranquillity and communal harmony in the state.

People’s Perspective towards Christianity in Tawang

Located south of the McMahon Line in Arunachal Pradesh, Tawang is one of the most strategic districts in the country. The district is situated at the height of 3500 meters from sea level, bounded by Tibet (China) to the north, Bhutan to the south-west and Sela ranges separated from West Kameng district in the east. The population of the district is around 50 thousand which comprise of only 3.6 percent of the total population of the state. The inhabitants of this district mostly belong to the Monpa tribe. The Monpas are predominantly Buddhist. Unlike any other district of Arunachal Pradesh, Christianity has not been able to make significant inroads to this Monpa community, till 20th century. However, with the modernisation and rise of Christianity in other parts of the state, few Monpa individuals, mostly the young people, started embracing Christianity in recent days. Apart from this, a few non-Buddhist communities of Tawang, especially the Nepalese, renounce their faith and started embracing Christianity. Over the years the share of Buddhist population from its total population has been significantly declined in the district. The reason behind decline is mainly because of increase in the population of other religion especially the Hindu population. The proportion of Hindu population in the district increases from 21.6 percent in 2001 to 23.69 percent in 2011 (table-1). However, in the last two decades, the number of Christian population has also increased to some extent. According to Census 2011, Christian population in the Tawang district increased from 308 to 776 constituting 1.55 percent of its total population.

TABLE-1: POPULATION OF TAWANG ON THE BASIS OF RELIGION

Description	2001		2011	
	Population	Percentage	Population	Percentage
Buddhist	29083	74.71	34920	69.87
Hindu	8441	21.68	11842	23.69
Sikh	420	1.07	1164	2.33
Muslim	225	0.57	787	1.57
Christian	308	0.79	776	1.55
Other religions and persuasions	414	1.06	349	0.7
Jain	9	0.02	72	0.14
Total	38924	100	49977	100

Source: *Census of India, 2001 & 2011*

The increase in the number of Christian population raises concern among Monpas as it may affect the authenticity of Buddhist religion. The survey found that more than 60 percent of respondents see Christianity as a threat to Buddhism in the Tawang district (table-2). According to them, Christians are aggressive proselytizer, whose only intension is to convert one’s belief. Since majority people in Tawang are Buddhist and they have their faith in Buddhism. As the Christians follow the convergence which may dilute the age old tradition and culture of Tawang. Most part of Arunachal has already come under the influence of Christianity and they are losing their indigenous faith and practices. People have right to defend its indigenous faiths and believes if some other religion is forcefully imposed on through greed or any other deceitful means. On the other hand, around 13 percent of the respondents disagreed that Christianity is a threat to Buddhism. According

to them, every individual has their own choice in terms of religious beliefs.

TABLE-2: THREAT OF CHRISTIANITY TO BUDDHISM

Expressions	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	21	35
Agree	17	28.33
Disagree	8	13.33
Cannot Say	14	23.3

Source: *Field Survey, 2022*

During the course of study it was found that more than 70 percent of the respondents believed that Christianity will influence indigenous faith socially and culturally (table-3). They believe that the Christian converts will not participate in the rites and rituals of the village (*Mang Kurum and Jhom*) which are mostly performed for good health, to fight evil spirit and to protect from natural calamities. Converts will not take participate on *Choikor* (a kind of religious procession). Here *Choi* means religious textbook and *kor* means moving around the entire village area. It is an important procession on which a week long worships/prayers are held at the Gompa and at the end of the day, people carry religious textbooks along with religious flags, image of gods and goddesses; idols and take it around the entire village. The aim of this procession is to provide supernatural protection to the crops and also to chase the evil spirits which may harm the village community.

TABLE- 3: INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANITY IN INDIGENOUS FAITH AND BELIEFS

Influence	Frequency	Percentage
Socially	26	43.33
Culturally	20	33.33
Politically	3	5
Economically	1	1.66
Cannot say	10	16.66
	60	100

Source: *Field Survey, 2022*

The converts will not host the religious flag (*Phan*) in their house. The flag hosted on the Buddhist houses symbolizes five elements of nature which comprises of five colours. The blue colour at the top represents the sky (*Nam*), followed by white colour for cloud (*Saya*), red colour for fire (*Mah*), green colour for grasses and trees (*shang*) and yellow for soil (*sah*), Monpas believe that all these elements are the guardians of the house. Apart from this, there are other rites, rituals and religious processions in the region like Tsepsh and Chotpa, which are need to be preserve and continue.

It is important to note here is that, the respondents are presuming that their indigenous faith and beliefs are in threat with the advancement of Christianity. However, there is no such historical background and evidence in the district that one can point out. The Christian converts are very limited in number, where as the population of other religion like Hindu and Sikh has greater share in the total population. The rate at which the Christian converts are increasing in other district alarmed the people that it could also happen in the region, and they may lose their identity as Monpa.

However, Globalisation and Modernisation plays more critical role for changing the indigenous faith and culture. The important aspects of the Monpa community like Monpa

dialect (*Monkeet*) which is fading among the new generation. The traditional attires (*Shinka, Kyanchan, Chuba, Khanzar*) are replacing with modern and western dresses. People no longer sing traditional songs since they are considered to be primitive. The traditional dances are performed lesser as compared to the earlier times. Also, the younger generation does not find the dances entertaining. The people do not seem interested in the ancient rituals and festivals their ancestors celebrated in the earlier days with enthusiasm. Today, the celebration of Torgya and Losar seems more of a mere participation than the actual celebration.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The arrival of Christian missionaries leads to a drastic change in the religious profile of Arunachal Pradesh. Majority of tribal population renounce their old-age faith and adopted Christianity as their religion. However, it is not pervasive in the Monpa dominant region where people were predominantly Buddhist. With the rise of Christianity in most of the districts, Monpas are afraid of losing its identity and at the same time they believe that the construction of church in the region may intensify the conversion. Monpas believed that the rise of Christianity will influence their indigenous faith socially and culturally. However, it is observed that there is no such historical evidence which depicts the influence of Christianity in the region.

People must protect their indigenous faith and beliefs but also should keep in mind that in a secular country, everyone has right to propagate and practice any religion. The encouragement of unity among Monpa community, to pass on the inherent traditional knowledge, scripting the Monpa dialect in Bhoti language, the creation of common fund that can be use for common cause, provide education and financial support to the weaker section of the society, are the positive approach that can be adopted to save guard the indigenous faith. Since, change in society is a continuous process but change should not be at the cost of one's culture and faith.

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